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ABSTRACT

Having achieved academic freedom, and working toward the abolition of social evils which interfere with students' freedom to learn, the English teacher must, above all, face his academic responsibility. In an age when parents abdicate responsibility for their children's moral education, the English teacher in particular has gained heightened importance in the life of his students. The ultimate responsibility of the teacher, however, is not to indoctrinate his students but to give them the tools which will foster genuine critical thinking and responsible decision making. (MF)

Freedom and Responsibility of the English Teacher

BY ELIZABETH CANAR

Since the groves of academe have become a battle ground — and sometimes a bloody one, in this time of upheaval and uncertainty — we may well pause to look at ourselves.

What is the role of the teacher, specifically of the English teacher in education and in society?

First, let us remember that academic freedom is a fact. Teachers are no longer victims of administrative policy. (In many institutions teachers help form policy.) The importance of such academic freedom is obvious. A teacher must be free to teach without fear of reprisal from the institution or from the community in which he teaches.

The student, too, is free to learn. "What is the problem?" you may ask. It is that just because a student has freedom to learn does not mean that he can avail himself of this freedom. His ability to learn may be impeded by poverty — it is hard to learn when one is hungry — discrimination, lack of transportation to a center of learning, or some other factor.

In order to abolish the social evils that interfere with freedom to learn, an individual may exercise his moral right which comes from his civil right as a citizen. Untold numbers have exercised these rights throughout history and today we have future evidence in government programs, peace marches, volunteer work, Operation Breadbasket — the list is endless.

We must remember, however, that civil freedom is not the same as academic freedom; we must remember that academic freedom is not a civil right. Civil freedom does mean that anyone who wants to work to insure the conditions which will enable the student to have the freedom to learn may. It does not mean that freedom of speech and academic freedom are the same. A teacher dropped for obvious teaching incompetence is not being deprived of his freedom of speech. He can shout his views from the housetops if he wants to. Within the classroom he must exhibit academic responsibility.

Let us come back to the student. He has freedom to learn; he has the same right to freedom of speech as does the faculty member, or for that matter, any other citizen. His freedom of speech must be justified by educational needs and institutional

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provisions for such expression. A student may shout from a soap box in the town square, but it is another matter when he tries to do this after he has barricaded himself in an administrative office.

Where does the faculty member fit into this picture? Just as the faculty sets up standards by which it judges the competency of its colleagues, so it must set up standards for students. If teachers are aware of the difference between academic and civil freedom, they are obligated to make their students aware of this difference. They must help students distinguish between areas in which students can exercise rights as students, areas which are related to the function of the college and the business of education and their rights as citizens. The line between the two freedoms is a fine line. Assuming faculty and students want to improve the existing institution, both segments need to consider their responsibilities seriously.

The classroom teacher is the focal point of this paper. Where is his freedom — and his responsibility? Think of the many liberal arts and science courses offered in any given college — political science, social science, history, psychology, biology, genetics, economics — all fertile ground for indoctrinating students with various ideologies, racial attitudes, religious convictions, and the like. If this is possible in specialized courses, how much more possible is it in the classes in English which we teach? Our discipline, if we choose, can cover all these areas. We have a wealth of material at our disposal: student writing, in and out magazines, newspaper articles, privately printed material. Sources are endless. We have the added advantage of being able to assign any writing topics we choose.

Let us consider some of the implications of these freedoms. Perhaps a teacher is a drug addict. He may even want to supplement his income by selling drugs. By clever writing assignments, he may find out who uses drugs, or he may find a few willing to try. Carefully selected reading assignments may produce surprising results.

A teacher who is an advocate of free love can find material to substantiate his position.

If a teacher is disposed to be a racist — black or white — he can find ample material to support his cause.

Many disgruntled teachers have used the classroom as a means to attack the administration and our institutions.

Reactionists, revolutionists, and, God forbid, religious fanatics have and will have their day in the classroom.

Academic freedom makes this possible; academic responsibility

does not. Why am I addressing myself to English teachers? Because almost every student enrolled in an academic institution is required to take a writing course. We serve the macrocosm; other departments serve the microcosm insofar as total student involvement is concerned.

If academic responsibility has been overemphasized in this paper, it is because parental responsibility has been de-emphasized. Many children have been raised in a permissive atmosphere. As parents have become less and less willing to assume responsibility for the moral education of the child, the school has had to assume it. Permissive, indifferent parents who want to be pals and not parents, parents who say one thing and practice another, parents who overindulge their children to the point that children lack initiative and self-esteem, must share the responsibility for the situation today. From the first grade, the teacher's role is a difficult one. When Johnnie wants to know about babies, Mama need no longer resort to the birds and the bees. She knows that Johnnie's teacher will give him the necessary facts. We may not be aware of it, but we are far more important to our students than we realize. We are mother image, father image, institutional image, and sometimes the only human beings students feel they can turn to for guidance. We are far more important in the lives of our students than we realize. We have a tremendous responsibility, but we also have an awesome challenge.

Teachers are becoming an increasingly important force in our society: the glue that holds it together or the bomb that tears it apart. If indeed we are interested in the glue, what can we do to help society stick together? We are fortunate that we teachers are not a breed apart; we are no different from other human beings. The same doubts, the same reservations, the same questions that face the students face us. We, too, are part of the problem. Is there anything, then, that we can do to become part of the solution? Let us hope so.

Consider these possibilities. We can try to act as mature adults, maintaining the proper student-teacher relationship. If any teacher thinks he is a pal to his students, he should remember how many students drop in to see him once the course is ended and grades have been turned in. Furthermore, we need not act like permissive parents and give students what they want. We need to give them what we believe they need. That is why we are hired. How many teachers themselves were victims of what they thought were irrelevant courses but which in later years became highly relevant for one reason or another? Also, we have

the freedom to choose materials which will be relevant to the student's education. Once these materials are chosen, they must be used responsibly. *What* is used is not so important as *how* it is used. If teachers select and use materials to play on the emotions of their students, arousing them to rebellion, revolt, hatred, atheism, then they are using subject matter as a means to an end. This is indoctrination in the worst sense of the word. If a teacher can take the same reading material, point out the fallacies, irrational arguments, and loaded language, he can again use subject matter as a means to an end. This can be a positive experience, especially if we are serious about the basic concept of teaching and educating.

If we are worthy of being teachers, if we are truly dedicated, if we do not think of ourselves merely as skilled laborers, then we must think of ourselves as instruments for preparing students for the future. We must remember that our job is *not* to indoctrinate, but to give students the tools which will enable them to think critically, to make their own decisions in a responsible way. They must learn to reason, to evaluate all they see and hear and read. This means that we will have to look within ourselves and face ourselves for what we are. We are going to be forced to take off our blinders and get out of our bags. Our attitudes and prejudices have been formed by our temperament, background, education, environment. If we are aware of what we are, we are also aware of what we can become. If we have not arrived at the ideal, at least we can learn to control our prejudices in the classroom. We can be open-minded and nonjudgmental. This does not mean that we should not stand up and be counted, or that we ought not voice an opinion, but it does mean that we must not impose our values or ideologies on those we teach. If I believe in free love or Ho Chi Minh, I have no right to impose my views on my students; I cannot use my position as a teacher to persuade others to join my cause.

If we truly believe in liberty, equality, fraternity, we should live by these principles. If there is shared responsibility among students, faculty, administration, trustees, and the community, our academic institutions will have weathered the storm and will have gained strength from the *sturm und drang* we are now experiencing.